Queer Theory

Lilith Acadia, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Taiwan University

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Summary

Queer theory describes a network of critiques emerging from a legacy of activism and looking ahead to utopian futures. The analytical tools queer theory provides as a mode of close reading and critique makes it a relevant contemporary approach to literary theory. Beyond reading for queer characters and desires in texts, queer theory is a tool for seeing below the superficial, and supporting unconventional readings that deconstruct normative assumptions. The activist roots of queer theory in the 1969 Stonewall Riots places drag, trans issues, class, race, violence, gender, and sexuality at the heart of queer theorizing. Subsequent work engages topics such as temporality, ecology, geography, and diaspora through the analysis of culture and politics, but also literature, film, music, and other media. Queer theory attends to both the rhetorical power of language and the broader structures of knowledge formulation. As feminist epistemology asks whose knowledge matters and who creates knowledge, queer theory asks whether knowledge matters and whether naturalized knowledge is constructed. Textual or discursive construction of knowledge is a key theoretical approach of queer theory with important implications for literature. Queer theory embraces a multidisciplinary and diverse set of influences, methodologies, questions, and formats. The critiques can be applied to help deconstruct naturalized epistemic frameworks around topics notably including, language, gender, sexuality, history, the subject, universality, the environment, animals, borders, space, time, norms, ideals, reproduction, utopia, love, the home, the nation, and power. Queer theory empowers novel readings of the world, and worldly readings of the novel, opening up new ways of viewing life and text.

Keywords: queer theory, critical theory, critique, ecology, geography, temporality, diaspora, rhetoric, gender, sexuality

Queer theory is a mode of critique that decenters normative frameworks and deconstructs assumptions. It is an analytic tool that readers can apply to a text to challenge the hermeneutic background that other readings might use to make sense of a text, resisting interpretive assumptions such as presumed heterosexuality, traditional associations with home, or reproductive cycles of temporality.[1] Playing on the German word *quer* and alluding to Kathryn Bond Stockton's "growing sideways," Tyler Bradway and E. L. McCallum describe queer as "a mode of thinking sideways, of turning around a question in unexpected ways."[2] Queer theory looks (*quer*) aslant at the text, and askance at naturalized modes of making meaning that may not account for diverse ways of being in the world.

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Queer theorizing often foregrounds literature as its analytical object, demonstrating its utility as a tool for reading literature both for the sake of close reading to understand the text, and to theorize the world more broadly. Queer theory is not only applicable to texts with "queer" characters: it serves as more than a hermeneutic for reading nonnormative gender, sexuality, and sex. Rather, queer theory's critical interpretive lens offers a rich analytic for challenging assumptions we take for granted about the text and the world. As an analytic tool, queer theory disputes premises and dissolves the pretexts (in a linguistic sense) that readers use to make sense of naturalized meaning. For example, it levels the hierarchies of human–nonhuman relationships, disrupts imagined histories, confronts constructions of "normal" bodies, challenges straightforward understandings of success and desire, and distinguishes often conflated concepts such as desire from identity.[3]

Sex and sexuality are central to queer theory, which emerges from a legacy of activism around nonnormative sex, sexualities, and gender identity. As David Eng, Judith Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz define the term in their landmark "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," "queer" in the public consciousness is "a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects" with binary identities, and critiqued "multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality." Queer theory promises to be subjectless and objectless, since "queer" takes "no fixed political referent" while engaging in a "continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism."[4] The field in the 21st century bears the legacy of its genealogy not only in gay and lesbian liberation such as HIV/AIDS activism, but also its theoretical genealogical roots in feminism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, as well as inflections of influence from post-structuralism, postmodernism, new historicism, and new materialism.[5] Early queer theory distinguished itself from gay and lesbian studies by acknowledging intersecting mechanisms of oppression, or as Annamarie Jagose describes, it "problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality" identity.[6] Likewise, 21st-century queer theory transcends gender and sexuality to engage a range of topics, including epistemology, ecology, geography, temporality, power, and discourse, all of which are relevant to queer theory's significance for literary theory. Five subfields are particularly appropriate for illustrating the range of critiques queer theory provides for the study of literature: queer critique, queer ecologies, queer geographies, queer temporality, and queer diaspora theory.

Queer Critique

Perhaps the two most widely recognized foundational texts in queer theory are Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.[7] Foucault is concerned with the external discursive construction of sexuality, while Butler considers internal performance of and response to sexuality. *History of Sexuality* proposes a genealogical account of sexuality that shows how knowledge of sexuality is connected to societal power structures, with knowledge offering an opportunity for domination. A key concept for queer critique is biopower, describing the mechanism of a modern political logic of exerting power over life functions through networks of institutions in society. Biopower describes those in power exerting control over others' bodies, such as prohibiting certain sex acts, legislating women's reproductive health, mandating exercise regimes, or the "collateral damage" of killing civilians to accomplish a political objective. Biopower's management of living bodies—

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as opposed to older power rooted in birth and death—is potentially constructive rather than merely oppressive, and has contributed to the rise of capitalism, orients networks of power in institutions from the military to academia, and has given central importance to norms.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and rhetoric, *Gender Trouble* argues that the constructed category of gender is normative and fails to account for differences within gender categories.[8] Butler brings Foucault's historical approach into conversation with Freud's psychoanalytic view of sexuality as "polymorphously perverse" rather than innate to argue that "the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are *constructs*, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or 'fetishes,' not *natural* categories, but *political* ones."[9] This reframing of sexuality yields a critique: revealing gender and sexuality to be constructed categories that individuals perform dislodges an essential understanding of the Human, disrupts universalized assumptions about the individual, and perhaps most importantly for literary theory, calls into question the speaking subject.

Butler seeks to explicate the queer critique methodology, while recognizing that the dislocatedness of queer critique, with its shifting field of issues, defies a fixed definition.[10] Revealing subject and statement as products of historical forces highlights the influential history of every discourse, which Butler argues "not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and . . . effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said."[11] Butler's critique suggests that the non-Western subject, even when permitted to make history, is not the sole producer of her history. Butler problematizes the presumed universality of essentialized concepts, highlighting their production through power to challenge modern liberal assumptions and offer an alternative reading: "Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power."[12] Such terms refer to constructs, ideas that human society continuously produces, and that reflect the society's power structures. Readers might extend Butler's critique to other concepts that are societally constructed relative to power, and might apply that critique to understanding comparative representations of such concepts. Since concepts like freedom, agency, religion, race, and sexuality are not "pre-social," they are societally constructed, so are conceptually particular to their social contexts rather than being universal.

While the feminist critique of universality primarily refers to the abstract universality extending back to Enlightenment philosophy, queer critique recognizes a plurality of conceptions of universality, rejecting transcultural claims in favor of specific cultural articulations. Butler identifies "the clashing of a set of presumed and intransigent 'universalities'" as the source of cultural conflict, yet denies the potential resolution of an abstract universality, calling it "a culturally imperialist notion" because it is normative and "culturally hegemonic," to enforce a singular definition on universality, "a site of insistent contest and resignification."[13] Universality is in constant flux, being replicated and redefined, so to impose a single definition is to deny its dynamism and limit universalities to the one conception that serves the dominant power. Universality that is absolute, or even homogenously defined by a single perspective, cannot then be a basis for theory or politics. Butler acknowledges the reading of this stance as calling for a strengthened, "comprehensive" universality inclusive of more perspectives, yet ultimately hopes to "undermine" the entire notion of universality, which would serve the critiques of sexuality as a modern universal construction.

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The critique of universality is intertwined with the critique of objectivity. Objectivity holds that there can be a single objective perspective from which the universal can be defined, or even a universal Truth that does not depend on a knowing subject. A deistic view poses God as the objective knowing subject of universality, leading to a description of objectivity as a "God's Eye View." Queer critique challenges such an understanding of knowledge production, not only by proposing that there might not be a God, but further that we should question the position of a subject at all. Perhaps knowledge does not require a subject who knows the object of knowledge. Michael Warner proposes that queer theory—with queer understood in contradistinction to normal—is a "subjectless critique." Queer theory allows us to understand, to use Warner's example, homophobic violence not as enacted by a single intolerant subject, but arising from "a wide field of normalization," a subjectless heteronormativity.[14] No single individual produces the hate; rather, it comes from a network of power structures and concepts.

Building upon Warner's views of subjectless normalization producing violence and the state's normative influence on identity, Chandan Reddy explains how homophobic violence can then be used to justify even a liberal egalitarian nation state justifying enacting further violence. Reddy argues that coupling freedom with violence is a descriptive and potentially normative presumption of modernity.[15] The "homonationalist critique" reveals "pinkwashing," which describes how governments extend rights to LGBTQ communities or draw attention to homophobic violence as a strategy for distracting from, veiling, or justifying violence against other communities. Notably, Zionist accusations of Palestinian homophobia, as well as appeals to Israel's gay-friendly policies and practices, serve as justifications for violence against the Palestinian community.[16] Reddy proposes the metaphor of an amendment, something added on to something else that changes, preserves, or elides significance around what it amends. He poses sexuality as an amendment to identity, and gives the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act as an example of a homonationalist amendment. The act in the name of preventing homophobic violence was an amendment to the 2010 Defense Authorization Act, thus coupling the allocation of funds for wars with a gesture of support for the gay community. One might extend the amendment metaphor to indicate subjects of power acting within the network in Warner's subjectless critique.

Without a clear subject, it is difficult to define a clear (or queer) object. If there is no single One defining the Other, then the object of definition cannot be simply defined, but must be understood in reference to the networks of subjects, objects, power, and systems of knowledge production. No single source defines designations such as normal, natural, perverse, pathological, straight, or queer. Rather, these are based on a societally constructed way of understanding the world, and the norms Foucault linked to the rise of biopower. Without a subject, there is no clear Other: queer and normal are discursively constructed in contradistinction to one another rather than in opposition to a dominant subject.

Queer critique opens up new ways of reading subject-object relationality—and rhetorical devices—as Stephanie Clare demonstrates in arguing that palindromes, figures that are identical when read forward or backward, are queer. As figures of correspondence, anal eroticism, repetition, and role-switching, palindromes "play with perceptions of spatial relations" by moving the reader in opposite directions and "collapsing" spatial and temporal differences, to become a mechanism for rethinking human relationality and its spatially construed difference.[17] Responding to Leo Bersani's treatment of anal eroticism as self-

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shattering repetition and his interpretation of the rectum as a grave for entailing “an irreversible end,” Clare argues that anal eroticism is a palindrome.[18] For example, “))<>((” is the palindrome the young protagonist in the film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* designs to describe his fantasy of finding someone with whom to eternally “poop back and forth.”[19] Clare reads “))<>((” as endless, addressing a particular temporality, refusing closure, development, the future, and perhaps reproduction, and evoking a mirror in which “the self is less shattered than extended.”[20] This multifaceted application of queer theory for reading rhetorical devices, desire, human relationally, repetition, finitude, and reflection demonstrates how queer critique can be applied to textual objects.

See also Biopolitics and Asian America, Theorizing the Subject *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-837?rskey=aVaBvC&result=68>*, and Object Theory and Asian American Literature *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-865?rskey=MpuXoL&result=20>*.

Queer Ecologies and Geographies

As queer critique questions naturalized understandings of subjects’ and objects’ relationships to knowledge, queer ecologies question a naturalized view of the human subject in relation to nature as an object, and queer geographies consider the role of space in subject-object relationality. Building upon Foucauldian and Butlerian queer critique exposing norms as historically constructed through networks of power creating knowledge, queer ecologies and geographies take up the call to “trouble” those norms by resisting assumptions about humans and their relationship to the Earth. Climate change and zoonotic diseases transmitted from nonhuman animals to humans, such as COVID-19 and Ebola, highlight humans’ delicate relationship to the nonhuman world, raising questions about how we interact with nonhuman animals and encroach upon their habitats. Queer theory challenges straight reproductive logics and the settler colonial impulse to conquer other groups and spaces, suggesting moral alternatives that could help humans reorient how we find meaning and define success in less environmentally harmful ways.

Queer ecologies respond to both Enlightenment European epistemologies positing a human subject knowing a natural object, and traditional conceptions of queer sexuality as unnatural in contrast to heterosexuality equated with nature. At the physical and discursive intersection of ecology, sexuality, race, and justice, queer ecologies challenge how such concepts inform one another. Recall the polymorphism of Butler’s queer critique; queer ecologies play with polymorphism transcending the human, disrupting boundaries in what Stacy Alaimo calls the “trans-corporeal” interface of porous bodies of the human and nonhuman.[21] Queer ecologies invite humans to consider intimacy with nonhuman organisms of other species, biological kingdoms, or even with biomes. A foundational text is Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, revealing the patriarchal and heterosexist foundations of scientific knowledge, and how that knowledge constructs what we think of as “nature,” for example as an empirical, objective, often dualistic concrete reality.[22] Were the Other—such as women or queers—to reframe scientific discourse, they might reinvent nature or at least bring themselves into the discourse.

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Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen ask “Has the queer ever been human?” in a special issue of *GLQ*, tying this central queer ecologies question to queer posthumanist themes in speculative fiction from authors such as Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Larissa Lai, Tavia Nyong’o, and Joanna Russ.[23] In questioning the queer’s place relative to definitions of the human, Luciano and Chen respond to a significant corpus of queer theory scholarship. This corpus includes the subjectless critique (see the “Queer Critique” section), queer temporality work on the heterosexist time frames that construct the human (see the “Queer Temporality” section), the antihumanism of Foucault et al., Roderick Ferguson’s critique of sexual regulations defining the black subject, Jasbir Puar’s theorizing on how the unhuman and unlegal serve as mechanisms to control, Karen Barad’s proposal that denaturalizing nature can undo universality and its definition of the human, Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer’s ‘crip theory’ challenges to conceptions of the human body, and Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on colonialism’s dehumanization of indigenous populations.[24] Anzaldúa describes a “mestiza consciousness” of the dehumanized indigenous subject who is willing to transgress the category of the human; she poses such subjects as queer for their reflection of the straight fear of being different, and thus nonhuman.[25]

Depiction of the queer as both animalistic and unnatural parallels how colonial powers posit the indigenous body as at once of nature and not naturalized as human. British colonial laws against homosexuality illustrate the imbrication of these logics, seeking to protect European Christian values from the “barbaric” (and therefore inhuman) indigenous populations’ “native” practices that might include “unnatural” homosexual acts.[26] Further, the colonial project involves the anti-natural exploitation of human and nonhuman ecologies. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson observe, the same societies seeking to defend “nature” against queers are also degrading nature.[27] Colonialism involves a physical movement across the globe that brings subjects from their originary space into a new space, yet the colonial project then claims that new space, making the indigenous inhabitants “others” in their own natural space. Such dynamics and their impact on definitions of sexuality are core considerations of queer geographies.

Queer geographies question how space and place contribute to locating, defining, and understanding sexuality. From the physical spaces of the gay neighborhood to the metaphorical space of the closet, queer geographies view sexuality and the spaces sexualities inhabit as mutually constitutive and transgressing heterosexual spaces. Looking beyond defining queer space by the presence of LGBTQ bodies (such as drag shows, guerrilla queer bars, or bathhouses) or as distinguished from heterosexual spaces (including megachurches, bridal shops, or suburban PTA meetings), queer geographies consider what constitutes a queer space in the sense of queer as a contestation rather than assimilation of heterosexuality.[28]

In considering space, queer geographies confront the spatial limitations of its own genealogy and epistemologies. Responding to how queer theory’s origin in North American activism and Euro-American academia have shaped the field’s knowledge practices and application, queer geographies consider how to expand the theory to account for the influence and experiences of other geographies, and the legacy of colonialism. The geographical locatedness and intellectual borders of queer theory’s foundation imply conceptual limitations of what Milad Odabaei terms “queer geographies of imagination.”[29] Beyond decolonizing the field, queer

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geographies challenge how the site of knowledge production limits its possibilities, and seeks to expand not only the examples or texts to which the theory is applied, but also the epistemologies and epistemic subjects producing knowledge.[30]

The queer subject who, in the lineage of Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness," is willing to transgress Enlightenment categories and recognize multiple places of descent, can decenter the human and also herself. The critical potential of such decentering allows for new readings of society and texts. Imagining ecologies and geographies in which the human is not arbitrarily and hierarchically distinguished from nonhuman animals or humans from other locations opens possibilities for trans-species relationships, while challenging egocentric subject positions relative to the Earth allows for new orientations. Like the aboriginal Guugu Yimithirr language of north Queensland, which uses cardinal (east, west) rather than egocentric (left, right) directions even to express spatial relations relative to the speaker, queer geographies decenter (if not remove) the subject, reframing how we view the world, and reminding us of the arbitrariness of many frameworks we understand as natural and universal.[31]

See also Animal Studies and the Contemporary Novel *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-419>*, Science Fiction *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-136>*, The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Literature *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-921?rskey=6mpolO&result=100>*, Apocalyptic Fiction, 1950–2015 *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-190?rskey=m8wffz&result=1>*, Anzaldúa, Gloria *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-358?rskey=brPNqZ>*, and Border and *la frontera* in the US–Mexico Borderlands *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-397?rskey=yUbBvY&>*.

Queer Temporality

The spatial decentering of queer ecologies and geographies suggests a temporal decentering of queer theory as well. An important concept in queer ecologies is the "anthropocene," a term to describe our current geological epoch (-cene), characterized by human (anthropo-) impact on the planet's lithosphere. Though ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer proposed the term, humanities scholars have embraced the concept, which is now prevalent in literary and queer theories. Conceptualizing human experience and influence on a geological rather than generational scale is in itself a queer theoretical move, insofar as queer temporality resists what José Esteban Muñoz terms "straight time," a traditional linear temporality oriented around reproductive cycles. For queerness, Muñoz writes, "is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[32] This subfield is a tool for reading the temporality of narratives differently, with its metaphysical analysis even opening the possibility for shifting temporality to yield utopias.

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Queering (which, as a verb invokes a critical turn along a queer ideological arc) temporality is an important intervention in philosophical approaches to and literary readings of time. Various conceptions of queer temporality frame it as agonistic, eternally delaying, or reinterpretive. Agnostic queer temporality refers to queer time functioning against straight time, while the eternal delay arises from Lee Edelman's endless deferral of queer time without futurity.[33] Queer time as reinterpreting the social desirability of actions posits queer as interrogating, critiquing, resisting, and shifting presumed definitions of kinship, labor, time, accomplishment, and resolution, with no one metaphor for defying neoliberal efficiency and heteronormative reproductive expectations and ideals, including a social sphere distinct from —though encircling—the nuclear family.[34]

Queer temporality reflects queer lives, queer society, and queer theory to challenge a normalized temporal view centered on the here and now and tracing a predictable past-present-future linear trajectory. On the level of individual lives, queer relationships transcend traditional romantic temporality with a chronology that is neither necessarily premised on nor constrained by the reproductive timeline Judith Jack Halberstam calls the "Oedipal frame" of familial metaphors for generational relationships and time.[35] Judith Jack Halberstam is alluding to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's point that queer kinship breaks the generational repetitions of (bourgeois) heterosexual reproduction in a cyclical model of time premised on "Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness."[36] Queer temporality questions straight time's normative assumptions, as also evident in Crip theory's critique of "curative" normative temporality; Alison Kafer describes "crip time" as rejecting normative, homogenizing pressure to conform to a perceived desirability.[37] The very possibility of transgender lives is a further queering of straight time, challenging reproduction as a basis for an individual's temporal experience, with reproductive birth as the necessary universal starting point.[38] To express the consonance between queer temporality and kinship, Carolyn Dinshaw pairs two stellar metaphors: Margery Kempe's image of a constellation of earthly and celestial family, and Walter Benjamin's depiction of history as a constellation whose stars appear to stand together though they are actually at various temporal distances.[39]

On a societal scale, queer temporality disputes a normalized "self-naturalizing" straight time, and queer "ecstatic time" becomes a theoretical tool to escape from straight time. Queerness is a horizon that opens and frees time from a limited linear path, which Muñoz sets at the heart of his queer utopian mission. Heidegger's historical theory, whereby historical existence in the past allowed for subjects to act with the future in mind, dominates normative readings of history and narrative. Judith Jack Halberstam describes such futurity-oriented time frames as nationalist, neoliberal celebrations of an "ideological system which gives meaning to the nation and takes meaning away from the poor, the unemployed, the promiscuous, the noncitizen, the racialized immigrant, the queer."[40] Privileging the normative political subject contributing to national identity, this futurity casts desirable, virtuous action as that which produces a certain nationalist future, and vice as what undermines that progress. Work is joyless and mandatory, a necessary step in the progression to earning two contrasting constructions with the capitalist system: leisure and rest, set in the future after the satisfactory completion of work. Yet a queer paradigm reframes a "forward-dawning futurity" by changing the temporality to have potential in the past, action in the present, and utopian hope for a future.

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Queerness is not productive of idealized identity; of procreative cycles; nor of the capitalist trichotomy of mandatory productive work, consumptive leisure, and regenerative rest enabling further productive work and consumptive leisure. Elizabeth Freeman reflects on the work of making the AIDS quilt: “we had a fabulous time,” resisting work as joyless, and death as only tragedy. Admitting happiness into a process of creating a quilt to remember those who have died from AIDS shifts the act from working to produce a memorial to deriving joy from lives the state refused to recognize as worthy. Queering productive action, the quilters derailed the straight trajectory, suggesting that the path to queer futurity is through pleasure.[41]

Following Nietzsche, Judith Jack Halberstam makes a case for “forgetfulness” excusing the unraveling of linear time’s memory of the past projecting into futurity, allowing that thread to snap in our memory, releasing the future from an anticipated cycle, permitting the realization of a more desirable potential for oneself or the broader society. The critical methodology of queer failure of productivity could be a temporal tabula rasa, wiping clean the slated trajectory of normative time. Kafer models queer time as a near-homophone of failing, falling, in the sense of tripping into temporary disability and falling as coinciding.[42] Falling off straight time’s normative schedule fails the future-anterior expectations for action, output, and product. In so falling, it avers the less active, lower output, unrealized products of actions that do not or cannot fit normative work ideals. Rather, it is an emotional affirmation that rejects a normative recognition of success, caring instead for the individual actor at an emotional level. The emotional is closely related to the temporal—think of phrases like “young love,” “love at first sight,” and “until death do us part”—with emotional response to failure being a key example of temporal strain on the emotion.

Desire for queer futurity is, at least for Muñoz, a longing for new and better worlds, for a different time scale, or a shifted relationship between present and future or between social and personal. These temporally framed affects are emotional responses to the inevitable failures of the queer Judith Jack Halberstam theorizes. Carla Freccero explains emotion as a temporality, suggesting that longing, desire, love, envy, trauma are all temporalities, with queer temporality being the *topoi* to question reproductive notions of time. Temporal language inundates our discourse on emotions: we use temporality to describe our emotions relative to the effect of temporality, such as “enduring” or “long-term” relationships.[43] Even in psychology, terms like “New Relationship Energy,” a buzz phrase in queer polyamorous circles referring to the emotional energy when one is first falling in love, reflect our temporal framing of romance, emotional experience, and especially emotional failure.

Queer temporality allows for doing something else with anticipation and hope for the future that opens a horizon, and potentiality, or what Ernst Bloch calls “anticipatory illumination.”[44] Embracing failure, disappointment, and subversion of normative expectations opens the potential for critical failure as an aesthetic that highlights normative expectations and reframes the predicted (temporal) trajectory. The unraveled failure, the longing emotion, or Edelman and Bersani’s queer *jouissance* of “shattering orgasmic ruptures” are queer temporal experiences that challenge, interrupt, and present a radical potentiality of queer temporality leading into a future where we allow our subjectivities to shatter.

See also Muñoz, José Esteban *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-356?rskey=wILjdL&result=1>*, Walter Benjamin and Jewish Radical Culture *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/*

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Queer Diaspora Theory

The shattering of subjectivities in queer temporality combined with the decentering of the subject in queer geographies and challenging of assumptions in queer critique all intersect in the emerging field of queer diaspora theory. Denaturalizing concepts and presumed narratives around sites and time of origin, queer diaspora theory offers a critique that moves beyond a hermeneutic lens to reframe the discourse. It urges us to rethink spatiotemporal assumptions about individuals "being from" a place, and coming at a certain time, thereby suggesting new interpretive possibilities for ideas like "home" on an individual level, or "citizenship" on a global level.[45] Dislodging those universalized terms and the imperialist logics and epistemologies underpinning them corresponds to other fields of queer theory, while adding an intersectional lens, arguing that these objects are interconnected. Gayatri Gopinath frames queer diaspora theory as challenging spatial and temporal assumptions, and providing a tool for understanding objects lacking a clear origin.[46] Queer diaspora charts movement not of people, but of sexuality: the international transmission of a modern, European concept that is then changed (queered) through its movement, so that the globally mobile sexuality becomes a displaced discourse.[47]

Queer diaspora adds an intersectional lens to "resignify" analyses, rereading *spaces* such as home or the nation of origin, and *times* by un-nostalgically engaging the past. Gopinath illustrates such intersectional resignification by contrasting queer diaspora theory with more traditional feminist or even queer critique through the object of Parminder Sekhon's photo of herself, naked, next to her clothed mother in their majority South Asian diaspora London neighborhood. Gopinath first gives a queer or feminist reading of the photograph as representing modern sexual liberation through the artist, and traditionalism through the mother. A queer diasporic reading, in contrast, "works against this neocolonial logic and allows us to identify the ways in which Sekhon evokes this series of binary oppositions" such as modernity versus tradition.[48] For Gopinath, queer diaspora can be as general as discourse across place, or "mapping of queerness onto diaspora."[49] By inserting queer, especially female sexuality onto diasporic readings, Gopinath hopes to show violence, not just nostalgia. Queer diaspora can reveal truths about the traditionally patriarchal and heteronormative nationalist diasporic discourse from which woman are generally absent, unless their bodies are being used as vessels for traditionalism. Whereas diaspora theory looks to the past and to another place for an origin time and place, queering diaspora resignifies the perspective to question the spatiotemporally fixed origin, to consider a future-looking gaze, and a subject out of place.

Disrupting the concept of home, queer diaspora theory also refigures concepts like kinship, family trees, descent, and love. Queerness often entails new kinship formations of chosen family, and diaspora geographically distances the individual from genetic kinship networks.

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Similarly to how queer time shatters the reproductive cycle of “straight time,” queer diaspora abandons the nuclear family model of heterosexual parents and their children as nodes in a network of similar genetically related families.[50] New kinships of queer theory make way for expanded depictions of love beyond the traditional heteronormative options of *eros* between a man and woman or *agape* in same-sex friendships. Queer love permits other readings of love, such as deep love for a friend of the opposite sex, erotic same-sex love, self-love, or love for the nonhuman.

Queer diaspora as an analytical tool poses alternative ways to view queerness, to counteract ethnocentric Euro-American gay imperialism that the homonationalist critique discussed in the “Queer Critique” section uncovers, or the dominant “universalized gay” globalized image of a certain (Western, white, affluent, cis-male) kind of queer. Bringing queerness into the construction of identities already charged with what Nira Yuval-Davis calls “politics of belonging” demonstrates that those identities are unfixed and contested.[51] As geographical diaspora transforms national and ethnic identities, queerness performs a displacement that parallels diaspora, shifting the terms of identity. Even the meaning of “diaspora” and “queer” are open to resignification under a queer diaspora theory lens. Daniel Boyarin presents such a resignification through queer diaspora, in which queer includes “the off-whiteness, queerness, and feminization of the male Jew,” while diaspora transcends and repudiates the Zionist project to represent not having left a place of origin, but of being out of place.[52]

Queer diaspora critiques nationalism (which appeals to diaspora) and globalization. In Gopinath’s analogy, adding queer to diaspora forces the unimaginable into the discourse as a challenge: “queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation.”[53] Introducing a new lens for seeing how diaspora happens within rather than merely across national boundaries, Gopinath integrates indigenous studies and aesthetics into her queer diaspora theory. Bringing indigenous critique into conversation with queer diaspora suggests ways to analyze works that are not immediately obvious as queer, nor as diasporic, a promising shift for applying queer diaspora theory to literary studies. This intersection produces a “queer optic” allowing us to see the “bodies and desires that are disappeared in normative tellings of histories,” and produce an alternative diaspora that does not “mourn lost origins.” An alternative to seeking, nostalgizing, and mourning an originatory nation or era suggests a promising solution to treating other concepts, such as an approach to “religion” after the recognition that religion is a modern Western construct. Traditional diaspora contains the desire to return to origins while presuming a normative, dominant, traditional, sociopolitical class being displaced to where they are Other. Queer diaspora, in contrast, is a way of seeing those who are displaced but not normative, dominant, nor traditional, while posing “alternative forms of desire” and an unromanticized alternative here and now.[54]

See also Hermeneutics *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-114?rskey=09WMKE&result=4>*, Queer South Asian Diasporas *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-807>*, and Asian Diasporic Narratives of Return *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-787>*.

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Briefly Noted

Queer theory, cruising the intersection of activism, art, literature, politics, and a multifarious theoretical genealogy, resists definition and formulation. Transcending the boundaries of high and low art, indeed of art and life, queer theory brings literary analysis urgently and powerfully to life: “The refusal to choose between aesthetics and politics is precisely why queer studies is so crucially oriented around literary studies.”[55] As an analytic, it has a range of applications. As a field (if it is a field), it embraces a multidisciplinary and diverse set of influences, methodologies, questions, and formats. Gender, transgender identity, race, disability, class, and other identities, as well as deconstruction, heteronormativity, and affect are important topics in queer theory that other articles in this encyclopedia cover. Queer critique, queer ecologies, queer geographies, queer temporality, and queer diaspora theory present a relevant and representative sample of subfields that have shaped queer theory and one another. These subfields demonstrate how queer theory, still weaving together activism and theory, responds to contemporary issues and interwoven themes. Several more branches and important considerations of queer theory are worth noting to give a broader sense of the range and direction of queer theory and its application to literary studies.

From Foucault’s and Butler’s foundational texts mentioned in the “Queer Critique” section, it is clear that queer theory is centrally concerned with the epistemology of the body, from how knowledge and power arise from the body to how sexuality impacts gender performance, and vice versa.[56] Notably, Monica Wittig argues that “lesbians are not women,” because they do not engage in the heterosexual relationship with men that defines women as a gender category.[57] In freeing women from gender categories, lesbian sexuality also frees their imagination, opening new utopian possibilities for creativity. Adrienne Rich, proposes that lesbians, defining their own gender and self, can cast off the patriarchal role of “the dutiful daughter” who “is only a hack,” and achieve creativity.[58] A less controversial reading of Wittig and Rich suggests that lesbianism is a metaphor for creativity that queers the confines of patriarchal gender and writing.

Barbara Smith extends the category of lesbian beyond both sexuality and gender to argue that queer political critiques can make a text queer, even in absence of queer characters. For example, Smith reads Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* as lesbian for its critique of heterosexist power and institutions, demonstrating an essential point: queer theory does not limit queerness to simply nonheterosexual sexuality.[59] After all, the history of sexuality to which queer theory largely subscribes contests the category of homosexuality in the premodern era, with thinkers such as Foucault viewing nonnormative sexuality before the Enlightenment as comprised of acts rather than identity, or David Halperin arguing that even the people of the premodern era associated sexual acts with characteristics such as style or even subjectivity.[60]

Queer theory proposes a queer historicity acknowledging that our understanding of the world is not necessarily applicable to past contexts: “homosexuality” in the 21st century has different valences than in Ann Lister’s time, let alone in Sappho’s. Queer historicity critically distances the reader from naturalized constructs taken for granted as universally true, and combines concepts generally viewed as incompatible. Queer theology such as the work of Linn Marie Tonstad exemplifies this critical potential, as does the metaphysical work that has informed queer theory, from Gilles Deleuze to Sarah Ahmed.[61]

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The activist roots of queer theory in the 1969 Stonewall Riots places drag, trans issues, class, race, and violence at the heart of queer theorizing. Early 21st-century developments in queer theory reflect continuing concerns over violence against queer bodies, with queer security studies interrogating questions such as what constitutes safety and who has access to safety and practices of securing safety.[62] The legacy of 1980s AIDS organizing, namely ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), bring in issues of sex, citizenship, healthcare, and epidemiology. Scholarship like Tim Dean's on barebacking demonstrates the potential of queer theory's critical lens to problematize even the most naturalized values, challenging the presumption that health is favorable to disease by exploring why "bug chasers" would engage in risky sex with the hope of becoming HIV positive.[63] Then 21st-century work reframing sex as leisure shows how much narratives around sex have changed.[64]

Queer theory's legacy of emerging out of activism and responding to immediate political questions means that as scholars approach new questions, they look to queer theory as an analytical but also moral framework for how to respond to scholarly objects from literary texts to political debates, and from the classroom to the world stage. Queer theory must contend with how activism has changed from Stonewall and ACT UP's confrontational direct action in the late 20th century that sought to expose trauma to early 21st-century campus trigger warning activism seeking to shield students from content-provoked re-traumatization.[65] A similar argument can be made regarding "safe spaces" when early queer activism sought to effect change though discomfort. To adapt to an ever-changing world, queer scholars must continually consider how to reconcile the legacy of queer activism at the foundational heart of queer theory with evolving activist priorities**.**

Queer theory does not always reflect the shifting priorities of LGBTQ activism, as critical queer theory responses to the mainstream gay and lesbian movement for marriage equality in the United States exemplify, from academic anti-marriage equality writing to satirical projects like Bully Bloggers' "Freedom to Marry Our Pets Society."[66] The difficult balance for queer theory to achieve in responding to political issues will be to resist assimilation, refuse to capitulate to normative values of white, Christian cisheteropatriarchy without, as Joy Ambler puts it, "policing each others' queerness."[67] Yet queer theory's critiques of mainstream activism should give the next generation of queer academics and activists both material and promise, for it reflects a utopian hope for queer futures.

See also Genders *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1123?rskey=wN2Vy4&result=1>*, Homeboy Masculinity *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-347?rskey=gJNr5h&result=14>*, Latina and Chicana Butch/Femme in Literature and Culture *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-344?rskey=gJNr5h&result=15>*, Transgender Studies and Latina/o/x Studies *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-349?rskey=WvKkm9>*, Queer of Color Critique *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-33>*, Queer of Color Critique and Queer Asian North American Women's Literature *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-860?rskey=gJNr5h&result=5>*, Racialized Sexuality: From Colonial Product to Creative Practice *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-346?*

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Conclusion

Queer theory's relevance to literary theory can be seen in the analytical tools it provides as critique, deconstructing naturalized assumptions or drawing new connections for the reader, and following Kevin Ohi, we can picture "queer theory as a mode of literary reading."[68] Beyond reading for queer characters and desires in texts, queer theory is a tool for seeing below the superficial, and supporting readings that are unconventional.

Queer theory is structural critique and close reading; it attends both to the broader structures of knowledge formulation, and the rhetorical power of language. Queer theory also suggests epistemic critique, questioning the naturalized premises of traditional epistemology. As feminist epistemology asks whose knowledge matters and who creates knowledge, queer theory asks whether knowledge matters and whether naturalized knowledge is constructed.

From foundational queer critique to 21st-century scholarship, queer theory has been revealing how language produces power. For example, Sara Ahmed's "Problematic Proximities" critique describes how proximity of violence to a given identity generates a phobia against that identity by making a veiled suggestion or prompting an emotional response. Ahmed argues that one need not explicitly articulate homophobic or Islamaphobic views to express them; proximities of terms build those associations, which may then even lead to violence, since such associations are "bound up with the justification of action."[69] Such lenses hold hermeneutic and epistemic potential: opening new ways of interpreting and understanding knowledge.

Textual or discursive construction of knowledge is a key theoretical approach of queer theory with important implications for literature. The subfields introduced in the "Queer Critique," "Queer Ecologies and Geographies," "Queer Temporality," and "Queer Diaspora Theory" sections help deconstruct naturalized epistemic frameworks around language, gender, sexuality, history, the subject, universality, the environment, animals, borders, space, time, norms, ideals, reproduction, utopia, love, the home, the nation, and power. More importantly,

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these analytics suggest further critiques modeled on decentering normative frameworks and deconstructing assumptions, asking the unexpected questions, and looking at the text sideways: queerly. Queer theory empowers novel readings of the world, and worldly readings of the novel, opening up new ways of viewing life and text.

See also Gay Literature: Poetry and Prose *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-689>*, Latina Lesbian Literature *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-353>*, and Latino Gay Literature *<https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-354>*.

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2. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and Tyler Bradway and Ellen McCallum, *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3.

3. See Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and*

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4. David Eng, José Esteban Muñoz, and Judith Halberstam, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (2005): 1–3.

5. Significant feminist influences include the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling, Marilyn Frye, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, along with Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (London: Persephone Press, 1981).

6. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 99.

7. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006).

8. Notably, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan; primarily, Jacques Derrida; and namely, J. L. Austin.

9. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 161, emphasis in the original.

10. Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993): 17–32.

11. Butler, "Critically Queer," 19.

12. Butler, "Critically Queer," 22.

13. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 40.

14. Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xxvi.

15. Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

16. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

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29. Milad Odabaei, personal correspondence, February 2020.

30. See, e.g., Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151–171.

31. John B. Haviland, "Guugu Yimithirr Cardinal Directions," *Ethos* 26, no. 1 (March 1998): 25–47.

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34. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

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36. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

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39. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 149.

40. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 107.

41. Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95.

42. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 36.

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